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Writing group

Denis Alexander PhD
John Coffey PhD
Caroline Eade MA
Julian Rivers PhD
Paul Mills PhD
Michael Schluter PhD
Christopher Townsend MA
Alison Watkin PhD
Christopher Watkin PhD
Margaret Wilson BA DipTh

Published by

The Jubilee Centre
3 Hooper Street, Cambridge CB1 2NZ
Tel: 01223 566319
Fax: 01223 566359
E-mail: info@jubilee-centre.org
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Biblical lament and political protest

by Andrew Williams

As long as the empire can keep the pretence alive that things are all right, there will be no real grieving and no serious criticism.¹

Walter Brueggemann

Summary

This paper considers the pastoral and political role of biblical lament in the Christian life. The theology and practice of lament is often neglected in congregations, despite its prominence in the biblical text. Such neglect deprives churches of a pastoral resource and moreover, as this paper highlights, diminishes the church's capacity for prophetic critique and political activism in the face of social injustice. This paper argues lament is needed in corporate worship and prayer, not only to give spiritual expression to faith wrestling with pain, but also to re-energise communities of believers to name injustice, recognise political agency and sustain prophetic action.

A story of lament

'I feel God is laughing at me. After everything that has happened, he gives me *this*... No one cares, church doesn't care. They're too busy playing church to know what is going on.' Steve, a friend and member of our congregation, voiced these words two months after being declared 'fit for work' in summer 2012, so that his £71.70 a week Incapacity Benefit (now Employment and Support Allowance) was replaced with £56.80 Jobseeker's Allowance. For nearly a decade several longstanding physical and mental health difficulties had made paid work untenable; instead, he managed to volunteer twice a week on a reception of a local community centre. The decision to reduce his income, and the mechanical manner in which it was carried out, made Steve very fearful and exacerbated existing struggles with depression and suicidal thoughts. In the uncertainty that followed Steve came to echo the confusion and despair that the Psalmist pens in Psalm 43:2: 'For you are God, my strength; why have you abandoned me? Why do I go about in gloom at the oppression of the enemy?' Steve's story is not extraordinary: 603,600 Incapacity Benefits claimants were referred for reassessment in the period running up to May 2012.² Nevertheless, Steve's lament against God and what he perceived the church to be doing – or not doing – raises questions about the place of lament in the Christian life. This paper offers a brief account of biblical lament, broadly defined as a *grieving for the present situation yet acting in the hopeful assurance that God will deliver and redeem*. We explore the pastoral aspect of lament within congregations, before considering the neglected role of corporate lament in shaping Christian political responsibility.

Types of lament Psalms

Over one-third of the Psalms contain laments, complaints or protests levelled towards God, pleading with him to help.³ In the midst of suffering, dispossession and injustice, the Psalmist called on God in a very human manner, remonstrating that God has seemingly abandoned his people, allowing their enemies to prevail, and showing no signs of changing things.⁴ According to Rebekah Eklund:

[L]ament is a persistent cry for salvation to the God who promises to save, in a situation of suffering or sin, in the confident hope that this God hears and responds to cries, and acts *now* and *in the future* to make whole. Lament calls upon God to be true to God's own character and to keep God's own promises, with respect to humanity, Israel, and the church.⁵

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd. edn. Fortress Press, 2001, p.11.

² DWP, 'Employment and Support Allowance – Incapacity Benefits Reassessments: Outcomes of Work Capability Assessments, Great Britain', Quarterly official statistical bulletin, Jan 2013.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, Augsburg Publishing, 1984.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, St Mary's Press, 1993, p.13.

⁵ Rebekah Eklund, *Lord, Teach Us How to Grieve: Jesus' Laments and Christian Hope*. Unpublished doctoral thesis. Duke University Divinity School, 2012, iv.

Lament Psalms usually follow a similar structure which transitions from the disorientation of despair to a re-orientation grounded in praising God's promises. Eklund summarises this as follows.⁶ First, the Psalmist invokes the relationship between the lamenter and God (for example, 'My God'). Second, there is a description of the complaint or problem – usually accusing God, the Psalmist's enemies, or naming personal situations of suffering. Third, laments sometimes combine protest with repentance, where the Psalmist confesses sin (Psalm 25:11, 18; Psalm 51:3–5, 9, 11) or asserts their innocence (Psalms 7:3–5, 8; 26:1–8). Fourth, the central part of the lament is the petition to God to intervene – it demands and expects God to respond to suffering and injustice. This is accompanied by an affirmation of God's character, giving a motive why God should hear and act (for example, Psalm 109:26). Fifth, there is sometimes an imprecation, or curse, against enemies who have caused this pain.⁷ Lastly, the lament almost always “presses towards praises” as its ultimate end.⁸ Worship in this context is intimately tied to the Psalmist's acknowledgement that God hears these petitions and will keep to his promises to redeem his people as he has done in the past (for instance, Psalms 13:5; 22:3–5; 31:14).

Why not read Psalm 10 now and see these elements of a Psalm of lament – address, complaint, request, and expression of trust:

(i) *Address*. 'Why, LORD' (v.1).

(ii) *Complaint*. 'Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. ...' (vv.1–11).

(iii) *Request*. 'Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless. ...' (vv.12–15).

(iv) *Expression of trust*. 'The LORD is King for ever and ever... You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed...' (vv.16–18).

David here complains to God as to why fraud, extortion, cruelty, violence, and all kinds of injustice are allowed to prevail, and lays blame on the ungodly and wicked men who, being consumed with their prosperity, have lost all fear of God, and think they may do whatever they please with impunity. The Psalm closes with the comfort that comes from knowing God is on the side of the afflicted and suggests God will not hide his judgement forever (v.18). The lament concerns oppression facing God's people, calling on the God of the poor to demonstrate his ultimate rule, authority, justice and sovereignty.

Lament, in popular language, is usually narrowly defined as a synonym for grieving or grumbling. Yet, biblical lament as seen in the Psalms is characterised by an expression of trust in the character, power and previous actions of God. The Psalmist submits a variety of complaints and requests to God – on issues that range from geopolitical conflict (Psalm 12), social injustice (Psalm 10), to complaints about themselves, and expressions of disappointment with God (Psalm 22:1–2). Psalm 51 embodies this more personal lament of repentance, as David pleads for restoration after coming to terms with the visible and invisible consequences of sin, and the reality of God's forgiveness (c.f. 2 Samuel 11:1–12:25). Equally, Psalm 42 provides a good example of the confusion in lament, articulating a struggle with depression and misunderstanding: 'My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"' These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng' (vv.3–4). This

reveals a heart struggling with pain, offering fears and doubts to God, and longing for renewal of spirit.

Western Christian culture on the whole is not good at voicing the shadows in life. The convention of cheerful piety and reverence has led to a tendency to assume that trust precludes any form of despair and that 'lament is unnecessary if one trusts, loves, and obeys God'.⁹ This risks denying the biblical resource of lament that *enables* one to speak from the reality of suffering, seeking to comprehend the heart of a sovereign God. Worship without lament leads to practices of denial if only joyful celebration is expressed, and some individuals and families will feel excluded when the church gathers to worship. The majority of Psalms were not written as private journals of individuals wrestling with God, but rather as hymns to be sung in the temple.¹⁰ Should then the practice of lament be reinstated in congregational gatherings of worship, both in opportunities for real-life testimonials and the range of worship songs (mood, style, liturgical content)? This way, a couple struggling with infertility; a family who have lost their child; a man struggling with a chronic and degenerative illness; and those cold in bereavement, may find in church a space to honestly cry out to a good, powerful God, even through profound pain.

The pastoral role of lament has been helpfully explored elsewhere;¹¹ however, the remainder of this paper focuses on the place of lament in shaping Christian social and political responsibility.

The political role of lament

Lament allows experiences of pain, isolation, and injustice to be confronted directly and truthfully in the public life of the church and society. Here I draw out three themes:

Lament as emotional resource

Lament speaks from the experiential disconnect between present suffering and God's promises to bring redemption. Lament cries out to God in the midst of pain those troubling questions: “‘Why, O God, have you let this happen?’” and “‘How long do we have to wait, O God, before wrong is righted and oppression overcome?’”¹² The practice of lament serves as an *emotional resource* that helps the oppressed wait on the Lord for justice that might never come in their own lifetime. The African-American spirituals show the importance of 'songs of sorrow' which acknowledge conflict, abandonment, sin, tempest, and loneliness.¹³ Under the pernicious injustice of slavery, songs of anguish presented an avenue for the oppressed to proclaim to each other, and to their oppressors, that 'the hand of justice will not always be stayed from the execution of its terrible commission; and they held God responsible for a deliverance that was beyond their own power'.¹⁴ Such songs, 'giving hope where otherwise there would be no hope',¹⁵ spiritually sustain those in the longing, and fight, for justice.

Lament as discipleship

Lament is integral to *discipleship*, learning from Christ who identified himself with the poor and marginalised. The cry for justice, whether it is a believer calling out to God, or a non-believer giving voice to their grievances, is important in mobilising the church to participate in God's economy of redemption. Listening to different patterns of lament can challenge those of us who live well-fed, safe and comfortable lifestyles in at least two ways. First, exposure to the lived realities of poverty, in the UK and elsewhere, can help church members to identify with, and under-

9 Dan Allender, 'The Hidden Hope of Lament', *Mars Hill Review*, Premier Issue, 1994, p.25.

10 Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Fortress Press, 1995.

11 See, e.g., Logan C Jones, 'The Psalms of Lament and the Transformation of Sorrow', *Journal of Pastoral Care Counselling*, 2007, 61, pp.47–58.

12 Dorey et al., 'Rediscovering Lament as a Practice of the Church', p.3.

13 Arthur C. Jones, *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*, Orbis Books, 1993.

14 Michael Jinkins, *In the House of the Lord: Inhabiting the Psalms of Lament*, Liturgical Press, 1998, pp.37–38.

15 Stacey Gleditsmith, 'Identifying with Christ: Why We're Called to Lament for Our Suffering World', in *Reformed Worship*, 2010, Vol.98.

6 See Eklund, *Lord, Teach Us How to Grieve*, pp.10–11.

7 See Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, p.11 for various interpretations of the imprecatory psalms.

8 Robert Davidson, *Courage to Doubt*, 1983, SCM Press, p.156, cited in Dorey et al., op. cit. p.3.

stand the issues facing people on low incomes (cf. Romans 12:15). Second, lament challenges received wisdoms, heightens recognition of the conditions that produce suffering, and can help overcome divisions as understanding deepens.

Lament helps hearers discern what 'justice' requires but, more than this, it is essential for *sustaining* a prophetic imagination that energises communities to secede from, and speak truth to, the prevailing consciousness of the powers that be. A number of scholars suggest one of the most pressing challenges facing Western liberal societies, and the church by implication, is the perceived incapacity, or lack of belief, to address political and social issues.¹⁶ James Smith argues¹⁷ that human beings are liturgical creatures – formed by what we *love* (practice) not just what we think (doctrine/ideology). Aesthetic habits of the body ultimately form a *techne*, a 'know-how' that seeps into our being deeper than intellect. Lament offers a spiritual counter-formation to the affective resonances of the world's 'liturgies' – of free markets, economic gain, and individual culpability for misfortune – which saturate our everyday lives. Brueggemann, writing in an American context, argues that the church is so enculturated into the idolatrous systems of pleasure and entertainment that the radical vocation of prophecy has been domesticated and co-opted. Public lament, bringing injustice closer to view, is needed to energise, nurture and nourish individuals and communities into an alternative consciousness that lets people see their own history in the light of God's heart for justice.

Lament as prophetic practice

Lament is an act of truthfulness, a profound expression of a people groaning for justice and appealing to their God to come and bring liberation.¹⁸ O'Connor writes:

Laments announce aloud and publically what is wrong right now. Laments create room within the individual and the community not only for grief and loss but also for seeing and naming injustice. Laments name the weeping and fracturing of relationships – personal, political, domestic, ecclesial, national, and global. The point of lamenting is... to name injustice, hurt, and anger.¹⁹

In naming injustice, lament serves as a form of prophecy, speaking God's truth to the world, which can often interrupt doxology (Exodus 2:23–25) to call into question old power arrangements that had long been legitimated and unquestioned. 'The removal of lament from life and liturgy is not disinterested', rather the absence of lament means 'theological monopoly is re-enforced, docility and submissiveness are engendered and the outcome in terms of social practice is to re-enforce and consolidate the political-economic monopoly of the status quo'.²⁰

For example, when Job, a righteous man, suffered, his friends articulated the settled truths that assumed and maintained the moral equilibrium, the accepted cultural theodicy that God only sent calamities upon wicked people, thus implying Job must have sinned (Job 4:7–8; 8:20; 11:14–15). Do churches sometimes embrace explanations of suffering and marginalisation that speak from a position of privilege and fail to listen to the voice of those who suffer? The failure to allow the voice of suffering to surface in corporate prayer and liturgy runs the risk of constructing a culture of individual blame (my situation is my fault) or denial of suffering (the system is really working when it is not).

Two important caveats follow. Lament needs to be shaped by biblical reality understood from God's character and biblical conceptions of justice. Otherwise there is a danger of lament being an excuse to give voice to our own biases and politics. Are violent imprecations levelled to one's enemies to be destroyed ever legitimate? Clearly, this runs in contradistinction to the nonviolent teachings of Jesus evidenced in his call to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). Secondly, there is a danger of proof-texting Psalms of lament to name particular enemies. The Psalms described the enemy in vague terms, suggesting perhaps the need to avoid becoming too specific in our identification of 'the enemies'. As Longman has stated: 'In most cases the references are vague, and we have every reason to believe they are so intentionally. The Psalms are purposefully vague in reference to historical events so that they can be used in a variety of situations.'²¹ One might be forgiven, therefore, for suggesting the Psalms are good at naming the grievance of injustice but do not offer particular calls for action.

Partiality, and prevailing viewpoints of privilege, can stand in the way as we seek to discern biblical notions of justice. While mainline Protestants and Jews joined African-Americans, led by Martin Luther King Jr, in their struggle for freedom and equality in the 1960s, white evangelical leaders were almost entirely absent and many of them remained fierce critics of King's goals and methods.²² In 2011, when a survey by the Greenlining Institute asked how much discrimination currently exists in America, 56.4 per cent of black respondents, but only 16 per cent of white respondents, said they thought 'a lot'. Most white respondents said there was 'some' (44.4 per cent) or 'a little' (39.5 per cent) discrimination.²³ If we wish to discern what it means to 'act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8), we must listen – not uncritically but nonetheless carefully – to the laments of marginalised voices in society.

Failure to heed voices of lament, Brueggemann warns, will domesticate Christian political responsibility:

A community of faith which negates laments soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions to God, they soon appear to be improper questions in public places... Justice questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of this speech form is denied.²⁴

The presence, or absence, in our liturgy of songs and prayers that address issues of injustice, debt, homelessness, oppression and so forth plays a major role in shaping the ethical, and hence political, attitudes of individuals and congregations. Since lament is integral to the discernment of justice, we undermine our capacity to act justly as Christians if we silence the voice of lament.

Lament and political protest

There are a number of arenas where practices of lament have led to churches taking political action to confront the conditions that produce suffering. Here I wish to focus on welfare reform in the UK, not to suggest this is the only form of injustice in contemporary society, but to highlight its sheer significance in shaping the

16 See Jürgen Habermas, 'An Awareness of What is Missing', in Habermas J, Brieskorn N, Reder M, Ricken F, and Schmidt J, *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age*, Polity Press, 2010, pp.15–23.

17 James Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Baker Press, 2013.

18 Ali Dorey, Ian Duffield, Julie Upton, 'Rediscovering Lament as a Practice of the Church – Especially on Deprived Housing Estates', *Theology and Ministry*, 2012, pp.4–5.

19 Dorey et al. p.5 cites Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, Orbis Books, 2002, p.128.

20 Walter Brueggemann, 'The Costly Loss of Lament', *Journal of Studies of Old Testament*, 1986, 60, p.59.

21 Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*, IVP, 1988, p.27.

22 Curtis J Evans, 'White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement', *Harvard Theology Review*, 2009, pp.245–273. Also see Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, Baker Books, 2005.

23 Daniel Byrd and Bruce Mirken, *Post-Racial? Americans and Race in the Age of Obama*, The Greenlining Institute, 2011.

24 Brueggemann, 'The Costly Loss of Lament', p.64.

lives of people and places.²⁵ The church's political responsibility is commonly thought to involve meeting the practical needs of the marginalised and engaging as citizens in democratic politics (voting, petitions, campaigning). Churches tend to regard political protest as a permissible choice for the individual rather than a corporate activity. Politics is potentially divisive and controversial in economically and culturally diverse congregations; politics involves the difficulties, as well as opportunities, of sharing a platform with other voices; politics risks linking the gospel with a flawed policy agenda, and politics is often considered not 'core' church business.

Nonetheless, I want to argue that lament, when taken in light of God's character to defend the fatherless and oppressed, can lead to difficult questions in relation to government authorities (Isaiah 10:1). Where there is evidence that specific government policies are harming the physical, social and spiritual health of segments of the population, when do events reach the point where congregations should decide to speak out? Speaking out, or engaging in civil disobedience in the political realm, can be understood as part of Christian faithfulness to 'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy' (Proverbs 31:8–9). All political action needs to be motivated by the example of Christ's radical ethic of *agape* – which calls us to unconditional love towards and acceptance of the other, and to seek reconciliation between oppressors and oppressed, regarding humanity as interdependent relational beings created for and fulfilled by the love of God and others.

Let me explore these themes in relation to the current debate around 'welfare dependency'. 'Dependency' has become a key narrative in contemporary society. It is almost always understood through an individualised lens which conceives people as rational decision makers, able to make the right decision to benefit themselves given a set of choices. This logic can be clearly seen in current debates over welfare reform. To help long-term unemployed people, it is thought that one must incentivise people back into work by cutting benefits. To break the 'habits of dependency' (laziness, lack of motivation to get a job) one needs to build motivation by changing behaviour, for instance, by providing work placements that develop a structured work ethic.

One consequence of the 'dependency' discourse has been the misunderstanding of struggles faced by people with low incomes. Moreover, not recognising the challenges people face has led to stigma, accompanied by resentment, and ultimately to the misdistribution of resources away from the root causes of poverty. Here the practice of lament can challenge the myths and lies about poverty we tell ourselves. One example has been the development of 'Poverty Hearings' where members of congregations and the wider community come together to listen and share their stories of suffering, struggle and hope in the context of austerity. Here congregations can seek personal experiences beyond the dominant accounts of welfare recipients that populate

policy and public imaginaries of those living on low incomes. This way sensationalist accounts of 'welfare scroungers' become complicated by stories of low wages, zero-hour contracts, job availability and suitability, mental health issues, and the trials of balancing different jobs alongside caring commitments. Lack of motivation to work will be better understood not as a behavioural pathology but in its relational context with wider social, familial and economic processes, including disadvantages in health, education inequalities, lack of access to green space, poor food nutrition, and housing quality. Hearing lament might bring a more nuanced understanding of the causes of poverty, including the way capital markets and property markets operate in the production of debt and isolation, and the emotional needs that underpin addictive and antisocial behaviour. Public hearings of lament can serve as a bulwark against embracing a simplistic moral account, in which a sharp division is made between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and which threatens to stifle a more radical Christian ethic of *agape* and *caritas*.

Conclusion

A host of theological, cultural and situational factors shape our response to contemporary forms of injustice. Making space for lament in our congregations is an essential part of pastoral ministry and political responsibility. Failing to embrace and respond to the voices of lament in our congregation and beyond will more likely make us acquiescent partners in the political status quo – lulling ourselves into believing 'everything is fine' when it is not.

Returning to Steve's lament, as a church we helped him successfully appeal the decision at tribunal and have continued to work closely with him on a weekly basis. The church has also created a support group for people facing similar problems of isolation, disempowerment and welfare bureaucracy. Personal support has been combined with political action, including local advocacy, and members of our congregation joining others to engage in protest and campaigning.

Lament is an act of truth-telling, a public act of grieving and hope that awakens us from our numbness. Hearing the stories and voices of lament refines and drives our discernment and critique of the principalities and powers at work in the world. In the words of Walter Brueggemann: 'through worship, prophetic word, and protest, we are called to expose oppressive social realities and insist: It could be otherwise.'²⁶

26 Walter Brueggemann, 'Unmasking the Inevitable', *The Other Side Online*, July–August 2001, Vol.37, No.4.

Dr Andrew Williams, a guest contributor to Cambridge Papers, is an Associate Research Fellow in Political Geography in the University of Exeter. His research focuses on the intersections of religion, politics and postsecularism, with particular interests in the areas of welfare and drug addiction. His latest book is Working Faith (co-edited with Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont, Paternoster, 2013).

25 According to the Trussell Trust, the largest foodbank network in the UK, 346,992 people received emergency food from their foodbanks in 2012–13.

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